THE MARCH OF WAR

SOUTHERN ITALY

(August 29 to November 15, 1943)

FIRST LANDING

AT the end of August the Allies made several vain attempts to gain a foothold on the Italian mainland, all of them on a minor scale. But in the early morning hours of September 3, an invasion with major forces began. After a violent artillery preparation and under strong naval and air protection, one British tank division and one Canadian infantry division of General Bernard Montgomery's Eighth Army were landed between Villa San Giovanni and Reggio Calabria. Subsequent landings near Ceramida, Palmi, and—on September 8—in the Gulf of Eufemia, brought the Allied forces in Calabria up to four divisions, which continued to receive reinforcements. The few German defenders fought a gallant rearguard action calculated to slow up the enemy's advance. They blew up roads, laid extensive mine fields (which caused the British severe losses), and succeeded in evading all efforts at encirclement.

SURPRISE AT SALERNO

On September 8, the American Fifth Army under General Mark Clark, including also the British Tenth Army Corps as well as some Canadian troops, started large-scale landing operations in the Gulf of Salerno. The announcement of Badoglio's surrender on the following day made it clear that the Allied High Command expected to exploit the situation to the fullest. Naples was to be occupied, and further large contingents were to be landed there, while a quick thrust in an easterly direction toward Potenza and a junction with the Eighth Army were to cut off the German formations in Calabria. But, apart from the fact that the advance of the Eighth Army was much slower than expected, a big surprise was in store for the Allies in the fighting around the Gulf of Salerno.

The Allied landing fleet was subjected to heavy attacks by the Luftwaffe. But, under cover of the guns of strong Allied naval forces and in spite of heavy losses, seven infantry and tank divisions of the Fifth Army were put ashore during the first three days. The British troops formed a bridgehead in the Salerno area and tried to enlarge their foothold in a northerly and westerly direction. American and Canadian divisions took over the eastern shore of the gulf and advanced to the heights south of Eboli, where in two days of heavy fighting they attempted to break through to Potenza. However, by September 13 they had been weakened to such an extent that they were forced to abandon their original plan and to limit themselves to defense.

It was at this moment that the German Command struck back. Just as the invaders were beginning to entrench themselves, German tank and mechanized forces rushed down on a broad front from their hillside positions. In a brief but bitter engagement they split the enemy into small groups which were put to rout. Large quantities of arms and equipment were left behind or thrown away. In outflanking maneuvers some of the enemy groups were isolated and thousands of men taken prisoner. By wresting Battipaglia from the invaders, the Germans also drove a wedge between the Anglo-American groups in the Salerno and Eboli areas.

In the Salerno sector, the British troops fared no better. Their push toward Vietri and then in the direction of the Nocera plain was stemmed by a powerful counterattack from two directions which threw them back to the coastal strip of Vietri. Although further landings were carried out on the western end of the Sorrento peninsula, the advance along the coastal road to Amalfi and a tank thrust from Salerno toward the north failed to relieve the British.

While all this was going on, the Eighth Army was feeling its way northward along the western coast of Calabria. Further to

the east, Taranto (September 12) and Brindisi were played into the hands of the British by Badoglio troops.

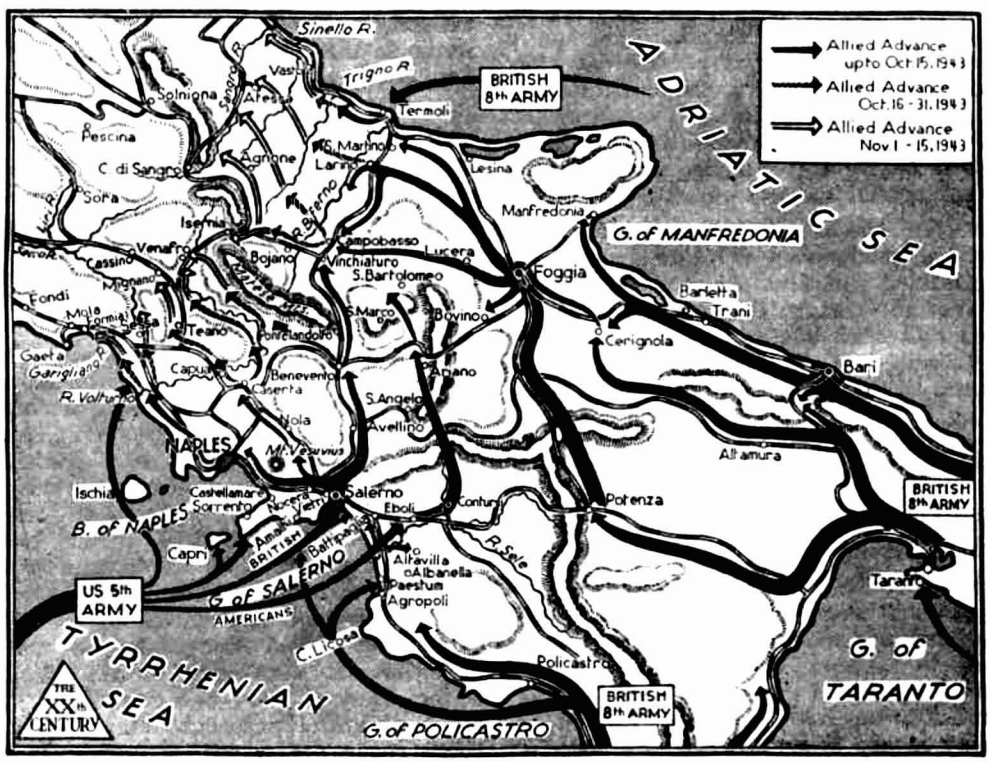
In order to speed up help for the battered units of the Fifth Army at Salerno, the Allied High Command decided to dispatch part of General Montgomery's forces by sea. During the night of September 17, about one and a half divisions of tank and motorized units were landed in the area of Paestum and Agropoli. Another tank brigade embarked to strengthen the troops in the Salerno sector. Then the Germans, after two weeks of fighting and after having united with their comrades who had been engaged in Calabria and Apulia, began to detach themselves. The front, which had run from Salerno in a southeasterly direction, was taken back on the left wing, with Salerno as the pivot.

In the two weeks' battle of Salerno, three German divisions, some of them of Sicilian fame, stood up against forces vastly superior in number and enjoying complete naval supremacy. The 36th US Infantry Division was practically wiped out. The employment of Allied parachutist formations, which was attempted by the British near Castellamare and by the Americans in the Vesuvius area, ended in their annihilation. Anglo-American casualties numbered at least 10,000 killed and wounded. The Germans took 4,429 prisoners and destroyed or captured 153 tanks, as well as a lot of other equipment. Between September 8 and 17, units of the German Luftwaffe and Navy sank 3 cruisers, 2 destroyers, one torpedoboat, 15 landing boats, and 9 transports, apart from an even larger number of vessels they damaged.

TOUGH GOING

At the beginning of October, General Montgomery's forces had advanced to a line running roughly from Manfredonia to Bovino, while in the west the fighting centered around Avellino and Mount Vesuvius. On October 2, Naples was evacuated by the Germans after they had blown up all installations that might be of use to the enemy and had rendered the harbor unfit as a naval and military base.

Since then it has been tough going for the Anglo-Americans, as the defenders have made full use of the extremely mountainous terrain, where small detachments in well-camouflaged positions are able to inflict serious losses upon an enemy plodding along



The Italian Front, September 8 to November 15, 1943

roads exposed to flank attacks from steep heights. Although far inferior in numbers, the Germans did not confine themselves to warding off the Allies: they often made counterattacks or launched surprise thrusts. Every strategic point was transformed into a hedgehog position and tenaciously defended. The Allies have, therefore, been compelled to undertake the wearying business of removing one obstacle after another without being able to start the expected large-scale operations.

The valley of the upper Volturno River —continued in a northwesterly direction by the valley of the upper Garigliano and Sacco Rivers, with Cassino as its gateway— is of particular strategic importance since it forms the main road to Rome. (The widening coastal strip leading to Rome is impracticable for a large-scale advance, as the Pontine Marshes form a natural barrier across this strip.) Hence, at the time of going to press, the fighting for access to this road is especially violent. Our map shows the inconsiderable Allied advance between October 15 and November 15.

In view of the Allied naval superiority, it is remarkable that, with the exception of a major landing maneuver at Termoli on October 5 and of some minor ones northwest of that city and north of the mouth of the Volturno River at a later date, no amphibian operations were attempted during the period under review. A squadron of warships which tried to bombard the port of Gaeta on November 1 was driven off by German coastal defense guns.

On the Allied right wing this lack of amphibian maneuvers is probably due to their lack of sufficient shipping and to the fact that the eastern shore of the Adriatic is under German control. Such operations are, therefore, threatened by attacks from air bases on the Dalmatian coast. Moreover, judging by his African campaign, General Montgomery is averse to starting any large-scale operations without superior numbers in men and material, which he is at present engaged in assembling before venturing to smash through the Sangro line.

On the Allied left wing, the US Fifth Army is now facing strong defense positions in the mountainous terrain running from Formia to Isernia. To break through this line would demand great sacrifices. On the other hand, the outflanking of these positions by means of an amphibian enterprise is more likely to be attempted, as the Anglo-Americans have bases on Sardinia and Corsica to protect naval operations in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Hence large-scale landings similar to those in the Salerno area may be reckoned with.

GERMAN DEFENSE PREPARATIONS

While the battle on the Italian peninsula was going on, the German positions in central and northern Italy were being consolidated. All Italian armies were disarmed, the lines of communication secured, and all important passes and tunnels in the Alps taken over by German troops. Italian formations in the occupied territories were likewise replaced by German or other Axis troops. The resistance offered by some Italian formations was quickly broken. The strategically important islands of Corfu at the entrance to the Adriatic and of Rhodes in the Dodecanese group were secured, and the British who, with the connivance of the Italian commanders, had occupied various other islands in the Aegean, especially Kos and Leros, were either wiped out or taken prisoner.

On the other hand, the naval superiority of the Allies in the Mediterranean necessitated the evacuation of the islands of Sardinia and Corsica, all troops together with their entire equipment being ferried across to the mainland.

The treason of King Victor Emmanuel and his Government made the period under review a most critical one for the German forces in Italy. But, without a moment's hesitation, the German High Command mastered the dangers threatening from outside as well as lurking in the rear of the German divisions. Central Italy is being defended by a large army under Field Marshal Kesselring, only a small part of which has been sent into battle as yet; while in the north another army under Field Marshal Rommel is guarding Italy's most important agricultural and industrial centers. This as well as the numerous deeds of individual bravery—outstanding among which was the rescue of Mussolini by a handful of Germans from a mountain top 2,100 meters high— have shown German morale to be unbroken and have caused the Allied High Command to desist from boldly exploiting an opportunity on which many Anglo-American hopes rested. As General Sir Harold Alexander phrased it in a communiqué: "All roads lead to Rome, but unfortunately all these roads are mined and their bridges blown up."